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CALIFAS: Chicano Art and Culture in California

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Panel discussion about "Artistic expressions in the barrio," left to right: moderator Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Stanford University; José Montoya, R.C.A.F., Sacramento, Carmen Lomas Garza, San Francisco; Pedro Castillo, UC Santa Cruz; Sue Martínez, San Jose; Harry Gamboa, ASCO, Los Angeles. Photograph by Jim Hess.

An important conference on Chicano Art took place at the University of Santa Cruz, April 15-18. "Califas: Chicano Art and Culture in California" brought together over 50 visual and performing artists, art critics and historians for an intensive look at some of the major issues facing the Chicano Art movement today. The conference followed up the highly successful "Califas" group show that was held at the UC campus in Spring of 1981.

Presentations and panel discussions featuring painter Eduardo Carrillo, critic Shifra Goldman, Galeria curator Rene Yanez, sociologist Mario Barrera, and other artists such as Carmen Lomas Garza, Cruz Amarron, Malaquias Montoya, and muralist Judy Baca reflected the rich diversity of Chicano Art in the current scene. Numerous slide presentations surveyed the works of participating artists and others around the state, as well as examining the historic contributions of pre-Columbian art and the Mexican mural movement. A variety night at El Teatro Campesino's San Juan Bautista theater hosted by Luis Valdez featured poets Jose Montoya, Alurista and Luzma Espinoza, as well as the East L.A. new wave band, "Los Illegals," who, with lead singer Willie Herron, fused socially conscious lyrics with high energy "punk" styling. (The group performed behind barbed wire with an effigy from a lynching hanging in the background.)

Some key issues ran through the course of the conference. From a feminist viewpoint, much of the male-produced art was challenged for frequently portraying women as sexually-attractive objects or mother-nurturers, but rarely as leaders or revolutionaries. There was also polarization over the question of whether Chicano artists should strive for success and recognition with the "Establishment" world of Broadway, museum and gallery showings, or should remain exclusively within the barrio, facilitating group murals, doing posters for movement projects and raising appreciation for "folk" arts such as the creation of altars, low-riding cars, and tattoos.

Another hot topic was whether the emerging New Wave trends, as personified by the musical "Illegals" and the conceptual performance group "ASCO," have, in their expression of alienation and their rejection of tradition and convention, rejected a place in the traditional Chicano Art movement as well. Though some found the groups too avant-garde and "foreign" for their taste, most applauded their efforts as one of the logical directions for Chicano culture in the 1980's.

"Califas" was a forum for the challenge of ideas and philosophies; it was a time for networking; and it was a chance for many in art circles to meet those artists whose works they had previously appreciated only in slides and books. Its one missed opportunity, perhaps, was the chance to bring in some of the younger artists and art students to get acquainted with and learn from the veteranos. As plans continue to mount a traveling exhibition from works presented at the conference, "Califas" will further act to show the rest of the country the dynamic state of Chicano Art in California.